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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TEL AVIV 002227

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TAGS: PREL PGOV KWBG KISR JO EG IS  
SUBJECT: ISRAELI, JORDANIAN, AND EGYPTIAN VIEWS ON  
JERUSALEM TENSIONS

REF: TEL AVIV 2207 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: DCM Luis G. Moreno for reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: An Israeli official provided the official view of the October 4 rise in tensions connected to the Temple Mount, citing deliberate Palestinian escalation despite advance understandings between the Waqf and Israeli National Police. The Egyptian and Jordanian DCMs provided contrasting perspectives from Israeli experts on the recent increased tensions in Jerusalem, with Jordan calling for improved Israeli coordination with the Waqf on the Temple Mount/Haram al Sharif. Israeli experts believe the incidents thus far have been successfully defused, but argue for further improvements to be made to reduce tensions in Jerusalem. Egyptian and Jordanian DCMs see a sharp rise in the pan-Arab popularity of peace process rejectionist Sheikh Raed Saleh, leader of the Islamic Movement's northern branch based in Israel and funded from abroad, as Al Jazeera's "Lion of Al-Aqsa." End summary

GOI: Usual Event with an Unusual Response

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¶2. (C) David Segal, Chief of Staff to Deputy Foreign Minister Ayalon, told PolOff on October 8 that the problem was not Israeli provocations, which always occur this time of year and are always controlled, but the decision by Palestinians to escalate the events. When the Temple Mount Faithful announced its annual plan to pray on the Temple Mount just before the beginning of Yom Kippur September 27, Segal said the Israel National Police (INP) affirmed they would not allow this group onto the compound. This has happened every year for many years, Segal explained, and every year the INP stops them without major incident. He added that the INP informed the Waqf in advance that they would not permit the Temple Mount Faithful to enter the Temple Mount/Haram Al Sharif compound.

¶3. (C) Unlike other years, Segal said, this time there was a large group of Palestinian protestors waiting near the Mughrabi Gate on the compound (note: the majority of the protestors were likely Israeli citizens and ID holders. End note). The INP successfully kept the Temple Mount Faithful away without difficulty, but the protestors mistook some tourists for the Jewish group and began to riot and the police were forced to respond to protect the tourists. Segal added that it was clear the the protestors had been organized in advance; the police keep the Temple Mount Faithful away every year, and only this year did the Muslims decide to use it as an opportunity to incite their population. Segal believes that Hamas had a role in the planning, but that the GOI also suspects some direct Palestinian Authority (PA) involvement. At the very least, he said, the PA's public statements have not helped reduce tensions.  
Egyptian and Jordanian Perspectives

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¶4. (C) Egyptian DCM Sameh El-Souefi told PolCouns October 8 that one of the main Muslim clergy involved in claiming that the Al-Aqsa mosque is being threatened by Jews and therefore must be defended is Sheikh Raed Saleh, the head of the

northern branch of the Israeli Islamic Movement. (Reftel reports that Sheikh Saleh was briefly arrested earlier this week and then banned by a judge from entering Jerusalem for thirty days.) El-Souefi said that Saleh has become a hero throughout the Arab world due to Al-Jazeera's coverage of his activities, noting that Jazeera now calls Saleh "the lion of Al-Aqsa." Saleh, in his view, is using the tensions surrounding the Haram and the heavy Arabic media coverage to transform himself from the leader of half of the Israeli Islamic Movement into a pan-Islamic figure. Asked how the Waqf views Saleh, El-Souefi said the Waqf is uncomfortable with Saleh's incitement to violence, but at the same time they value his collection of financial contributions from the Gulf, much of which he reportedly donates to the Waqf. In any event, the Waqf cannot challenge Sheikh Saleh since he is now widely perceived by Arabs abroad as almost single-handedly repelling Israel's "designs" against Al-Aqsa.

¶5. (C) Jordanian Embassy DCM Daifallah Ali Al-Fayez told PolOff in an October 8 meeting that the Jordanian Embassy and Waqf officials had warned the Israeli National Police (INP) of potential violence on the Temple Mount/Haram Al Sharif, but that the warnings were ignored. He said the warnings began September 26, the day before Yom Kippur and that they specifically asked the INP to close off the Haram to non-Muslims. The Waqf also warned the INP of the 200-300 Muslim youths who had stayed overnight October 3-4, but that on both occasions the INP refused to make the gesture of closing the Mughrabi Gate to all visitors. Al-Fayez said the Waqf informed the INP of rumors that the Temple Mount Faithful would attempt to enter to pray in the Al Aqsa Mosque, but that the Israeli response was that there were always such rumors during the Jewish High Holy Days and that

TEL AVIV 00002227 002 OF 003

the sole gate for non-Muslim visitors to the Temple Mount would remain open.

¶6. (C) According to the Israeli MFA's video footage shown to Al-Fayez, the youths assembled inside the Haram on October 4 threw objects at some of the first visitors who came through the gate when it was opened at 0730 -- two French tourists. The police then withdrew through the gate and re-entered in riot gear. Many of the youths gathered inside the Haram came to Jerusalem from northern Israel in response to a call to "defend Al Aqsa" that was issued two days earlier by Sheikh Raed Salah of the Islamic Movement's northern branch in Umm-el-Fahm during its annual "Jerusalem Day" conference. Al-Fayez claimed that such groups that rejected the peace process were gaining influence and credibility and that there was a danger that such extremists would set the tone in Jerusalem and throughout the Arab world, noting the demonstrations that occurred in Jordan as well.

¶7. (C) Al-Fayez also complained that almost the entire Jordanian/Israeli bilateral agenda was concerned with Jerusalem and that the government of Israel was "fueling tension" by its actions in Jerusalem. He cited the Minister of Internal Security's visit to the Haram, Silwan tunneling, settlement expansion, Sheikh Jarrah, and Shepherd's Hotel. He said that relations between the Waqf, which is comprised of more than 500 employees directly paid and managed by the Ministry of Religion in Amman, and the GOI were characterized by deep distrust. He complained of the INP's sole control over the Mughrabi Gate since 2003, whereas previously it had been under joint control. Among other complaints were the INP's occasional denial of issuing permits to Waqf employees, the detaining of Waqf employees, the denial of entry for several hours to Waqf employees on October 4 as well as the denial of exit to Waqf employees who were present during the riots, and rumors that some Waqf employees had been asked to sign agreements with the INP to inform on activities within the Haram. Al-Fayez did note, however, that the Waqf meets regularly with the INP and exchanges information.

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Israeli Perspectives

¶8. (C) Tel Aviv University professor Eyal Zisser, an expert

on Arab-Israeli relations, told PolOff in an October 8 meeting that the riots on the Temple Mount were only an issue due to a slow media cycle and that he explained as much in several televised interviews. He believed the INP handled the riots surprisingly well this time, as no blood was shed, unlike the five killed in 2000 or the 23 killed on the Temple Mount during Sukkot in 1990.

¶9. (C) Zisser mentioned Jordan,s wish to return to the pre-2000 arrangement where the Mughrabi Gate was controlled by the Waqf, but noted that it had changed because the Waqf kept the gate closed to non-Muslim visitors during 2000-2003. In 2003, PM Sharon reopened the gate to all visitors and the INP has exercised sole control of the gate since then. He noted the INP,s consistent handling of any extremist Jewish group attempting to enter onto the Temple Mount and questioned whether the Waqf would be able to handle direct contact with such groups and deny entry to visitors. He further questioned both the need to prevent prayer by non-Muslims on the Temple Mount and the legitimacy of closing the area to non-Muslims.

¶10. (C) In contrast to the Egyptian and Jordanian DCMs, views, Zisser assessed the attempt of the northern branch of the Islamic Movement to incite the riots failed to enhance Sheikh Saleh,s standing, which he said has been in decline compared with the moderate southern branch of the Islamic Movement. He noted that, unlike in neighboring Arab countries, religious parties are legal in Israel. He believed the police handled Sheikh Saleh,s arrest for incitement well and that the court order releasing him but banning him from Jerusalem for thirty days was a good demonstration of an accountable democracy in action.

¶11. (C) Jerusalem Institute Director Yaacov Bar Siman Tov assessed the situation similarly to PolOff, noting that Sheikh Saleh held his yearly rally in Umm-el-Fahm to coincide with the Jewish High Holidays specifically to incite crowds to journey to Jerusalem expecting to clash with police to protect the Haram al Sharif from any third Temple zealots. The southern branch of the Islamic Movement, which accepts the Oslo accords, also claimed publicly that Sheikh Saleh was exploiting the issue for his personal aggrandizement. Hebrew University of Jerusalem Professor Yitzhak Reiter detailed in the press Saleh,s past actions of walking a fine line between political activism and material support for terrorism. He also noted Saleh,s limited following among Muslims even when he has organized such bussed-in riot operations in the past or when he paid for protestors to stone vehicles in Umm-el-Fahm last year. Reiter noted that Salah,s conspiracy rumors about the Mughrabi Gate were successfully countered in 2007 by the authorities, live

TEL AVIV 00002227 003 OF 003

simulcasts of the Mughrabi Gate project that refuted Salah,s claims. He argued that the GOI could have done more this time to defuse tensions through such public education.

¶12. (C) According to the press, some 6500 Muslim worshipers are assembling in Jerusalem to worship today on a day that one Egyptian cleric called for as a "Day of Anger" in response to last Sunday,s riots. Police allowed entrance only to Israeli ID owners who were males over age 50, with no restrictions on women worshipers. This evening begins the Jewish celebration of Simchat Torah, the final event of the Jewish High Holy Days. The INP remains on high alert throughout Jerusalem.

CUNNINGHAM